

Working in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project
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Clark Gayton
Jazz Musician/Composer/Producer, New York

Interviewee: Clark Gayton

Interviewers: Alek Gayton

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CLARK GAYTON 00:00:21: Hey Alek, what's up?

ALEK GAYTON 00:00:21: Hey Clark, how's it going, man?

CLARK 00:00:23: Great, man. How you feeling?

ALEK 00:00:25: I'm doing good. You know, it's been pretty different the last few weeks. Last few months, I should say. Just getting through it as much as possible. How are you doing?

CLARK 00:00:37: Everything's good. You've got a hot day today in New York and—but generally I've been keeping—been able to keep it together. It's been okay. But it's because of—the idea of not really knowing what's going to be going on from day to day is a little little strange—trying to take it minute by minute, as they say.

ALEK 00:00:57: Oh, without a doubt. Hey Clark, if it's okay with you, I'm going to record some of this conversation.

CLARK 00:01:02: No problem.

ALEK 00:01:04: Yeah, so like I said, I appreciate you being available to do this. I'm in this class—this course at U dub [University of Washington] right now. We're talking about how COVID— It's a class based on how musical performance works, and how the economy have related together and the project is we're talking to musicians that have been affected by the COVID-19 and sharing and— Maybe we can discuss a little bit how that's impacted your career and go from there. Clark, why don't you just give a little background on yourself?

CLARK 00:01:44: Well, Clark Gayton— Carver Clark Gayton. Son of Carver Gayton, there in Seattle, as you know, and great nephew of your grandfather. I was born in 1963 in Seattle, and, as soon as I was born, we moved out to Jersey, [? inaudible ?]_____ and came back. Ended up going to Harrison, which I think they changed the name of the school now. I went to Meany [Middle School] and Madrona [Elementary School], graduated from Garfield [High School]. And while I was at Garfield, I took the course—Advanced Placement courses at Cornish [College of the Arts] and also at the University of Washington. After getting out, finishing high school, I went to school at Berklee [College of Music], graduated from there and moved to the [San Francisco] Bay Area, where I worked for the most part of three years. And around 1987 moved to New York City where I've been ever since.

ALEK 00:02:59: Cool. I think one thing that's interesting—this is why a great time to talk to you— Right now, there's just been a lot of—with the COVID stuff, but then also happening with protests—there's been a lot of kind of stuff happening in New York. Why don't you discuss, first and foremost, how this all changed your career currently, in regards to tours getting canceled—maybe you can kind of talk a little about that.

CLARK 00:03:30: Yeah. It all kind of happened pretty abruptly. I'm not sure if—it was for me. There was a couple people in my life that were there telling me that this thing is coming and it's gonna be crazy. And a lot of people were early on—were stocking up on toilet paper and canned food and all that sort of thing. And I—over the years, these things—we've had these threats, the bird fever and SARS and all this sort of thing and nothing really happened to me. To be quite honest, I didn't take it that seriously—like this thing that they talked about, nothing's gonna happen. So that was really my thought. But, then, what happened is I started really noticing people around me getting sick. And shows getting canceled because people were so sick that they couldn't even get out of bed. And that's when I said, Okay, well, this is something else. What actually happened, initially, for me, is I ended up covering for a bunch of guys that couldn't make gigs in the last few weeks before the shutdown. And those gigs went fine. But, then, within probably three days after my last gig, they did announce that they're shutting everything down. Let me put it like this—it got out to people all around the country that had tours and gigs—people started just canceling gigs. And, so, I think within three days, my entire schedule for the year was cleared. I had a couple tours planned, and all my local gigs were canceled. So, within about

three days, everything went belly up, and I realized that this is different. This isn't going to be a—this isn't (*laughs*) going to blow over like the other stuff.

ALEK 00:05:40: Sure. Yeah, and I have a my—the teacher that I study with at U dub. He lived in New York for a number of years. He probably—he said it best—just everything was put on pause, where it's—everything is like—tours or shows— It's like, they were canceled now and then hopefully transplanted to later on next year.

CLARK 00:06:09: Yeah, that's kind of what they told me—that all the gigs not canceled, is postponed, and, in my life, if you say something is gonna be postponed 'til next year then, to me, it's just not happening. It's canceled, basically, because I can't plan for a year in advance. I could barely plan three months in advance. Things change so rapidly, and I tend not to take gigs three months in advance. I just kinda take everything week to two weeks in advance, that way, 'cause things just happen so quickly. But I had a tour of Spain that was supposed to happen in June. That was canceled. And also had a slated tour with [Bruce] Springsteen that was supposed to happen, and that got canceled, so I lost a lot. And, yeah, it was pretty devastating. A lot of musicians were very distraught. And so I think a lot of people mentally were— I mean, I actually lost a lot of friends from the disease, a lot of musician friends, because my opinion of—musicians are very vulnerable right now because they just live hand to mouth so they—a lot of guys didn't know—I think a lot of my friends just gave up, I believe. Yeah, I can't be sure, but I think a couple of my friends have committed suicide because it was so— So, yeah, it was was pretty rough, and we're trying to keep everybody's morale up. That's kind of what we're doing these days is trying to keep everybody's heads up and try to keep people engaged, and not get depressed. Look at the bright side, any silver lining that is to be seen. We're trying to direct everybody's attention towards that.

ALEK 00:08:12: Yeah, absolutely, and the biggest thing that I've been taking away from all of this happening is just the sense of community and sense of family and a sense of friends and really strengthening these as much as possible because I think it's just very important right now since we can't see each other, we can't interact—especially for the importance in our role as musicians and artists. We give back to the world that way.

CLARK 00:08:35: Yeah, absolutely. I'm a little bit guarded about that. I mean, I guess you called me so I guess you want my opinion, but I am very apprehensive about—I think a lot of weight— For a lot of people, their way of dealing with it is just to record themselves playing and throwing it up on YouTube or Facebook. I've been trying to steer away from that because, as you know, the value of music is—it's been devalued to almost zero. So, I tried not to do—post and then do things for free. I think this is actually a good time for musicians to kind of establish—try to get back some of the value that we lost by just not providing that comfort for everybody. If you want it, you're gonna have to pay for it, you know, and pay correctly. You, because we don't have [? inaudible ?] _____ to Spotify and Pandora and ASCAP [American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers] is useless and BMI [Broadcast

Music, Inc.] is useless. The only thing I have is to very carefully delegate who, what I give my product to, if that makes any sense.

ALEK 00:09:55: Yeah, absolutely, and actually, talking—the conversation because this whole COVID thing really exposed a lot of issues in the music industry, exposed a lot. From your perspective—a majority of your income is based off performing, right? And gigging?

CLARK 00:10:18: Yeah, recording. It's been very much a mixed bag of different things and I've been—it's been fortunate, but most of the stuff I do involves me being around people, so that's kind of why everything got shut down. But what has been my saving grace this whole time is having a remote recording setup at home. And that's kind of what has kept everything above water up until this point. So, I've produced a couple records, I've been doing recording for people's records, and sending tracks out to people, and vice versa. So, that's been the thing that's really kept things going. So, I'm very grateful for that, and I try to encourage that for all musicians right now to figure out some way to record remotely so you can still work.

ALEK 00:11:25: Yeah, absolutely. Well, it's funny, because I started school—started a master's degree earlier this year, and I was, obviously, studying privately and then this last few months has just been just that is just getting this home studio situation flushed out, because we're essentially going to be here for a little bit—

CLARK 00:11:58: It looks like it. There's been some others— Some people are working on solutions, as you know, all the time, trying to figure out how to play remotely together. My opinion: it's kind of a waste of time, and the technology isn't there yet—the kind of bandwidth to really do something like that that's available to everybody. I remember The Rolling Stones tried to do it, and it was unsuccessful. So I don't think I'll be able to do that from the Bronx. *(laughs)* But I'm actually doing a live show tomorrow, matter of fact, with a Bronx [*firm*] approximately got some public funding, and we're going to try—we're using these different platforms and different applications to try to do this thing. It's not going to be completely live. We're working from some tracks already being in place, having soloists play live to two tracks that were pre-recorded and see how that works.

ALEK 00:13:12: Yeah, absolutely. Well, again, it's just adapt; we have this technology, and it's just a matter of, Okay, what's the—how far can we take it to still keep—to progress and keep moving?

CLARK 00:13:25: What about— Have people trying to do shows outdoors, that sort of thing, in Seattle?

ALEK 00:13:34: It's been hard because, first of all, the weather has been bad. Seattle, right now, has been— Seattle, it's not a big city. So, a lot of the protests that have been happening of late have just kind of overtaken the city. And, just generally, I don't know how much exposure you had to the scene up there. The Seattle scene—it doesn't have—it just really relies on the venues and the clubs. There

hasn't—I haven't really noticed much of that push to try and get outdoor things going. I know people have done it on a whim, just to come play out, but there hasn't really been any cohesive thing that has happened. It's kind of been dormant. It's been really—it's been hard on the city, Seattle, because you're dealing with this tech industry that just engulfs Seattle, and the venues— There's a lot of great venues and was a great music scene, but it just has this stranglehold already—before this happened. And now you're having this reality that a lot of these great venues, that are really trying to help musicians and the art community, are just trying to open back up. And so there's—it's just constant juggling a lot. There's so many artists, musicians there—people were just trying to get some decent footing and it's been tricky trying to figure out how, at least with Seattle, how they're gonna rebound from it.

CLARK 00:15:14: People get scared— You really gotta think outside the box. I'm actually— Next month, I'm moving. I'm going to move from my place in the Bronx—upstate. And the reason being—near Woodstock— But the reason being just to be someplace where there's a little bit more openness. And I believe that they're going to have more shows in places that are more rural, or just not so densely populated. I think those— I'm guessing it might be a good idea for musicians to concentrate on those kinds of areas to do shows. I'm going to be doing my own shows in abandoned driveway theaters, shit like that, and have people view from the car, and broadcast through Facebook to hear everything. And it's just an idea. I don't know if it's gonna work. I know they're doing that in Europe. They are doing that in Europe and I think it's been pretty successful. I know Seattle—there's probably some places to try to do that, but I think it's going to take people thinking outside the box to—people got to work, they got to play, so got to figure out ways to do it. I don't have any answers, but that's gonna be what I'm going to attempt to do until things level out a little bit better.

ALEK 00:16:38: That's really great. Honestly, at this point, like I said, it's just thinking outside the box is kind of a necessity here because we never—I've never been in this situation before where you can go outside, but you can't really see any people or anything like that. And it's hard with musicians. Are you a part of any type of— Is there any type of support for the artist community in New York or any type of organizations that help in any way?

CLARK 00:17:09: Not really. There's a couple of organizations that I've been involved with: the Jazz Foundation [of America], which is a national, nationwide organization, but based in New York. They've been helpful, the Jazz Foundation. And there's also the Louis Armstrong Foundation that—they actually issued grants to a few jazz musicians, local jazz musicians. I was fortunate to get one of those. And I got another grant from the MusiCares Foundation, which is the Grammys, basically. They passed on a grant to me, so— But there is no—the musicians union is useless. They're not doing anything. But there's really no organization that just deals with this head on. But Wynton Marsalis is, I think—he's the head of the Louis Armstrong Foundation—I think he's the one that made sure guys got some grants in their pocket, but it doesn't— It solves just a few problems because, obviously, not everybody is a jazz musician, and not everybody knows Wynton, and not everybody's income is playing in the type of clubs that support jazz. So there's a lot of people that kind of fell through the cracks with that.

ALEK 00:18:38: Yeah, absolutely, and it just—Yeah, speaking now from my perspective, or I'll ask of you—it's just really tough to try to make a living as things have changed and streaming platforms become more common, and finding work is challenging. Let me back up a little bit and change gears here, off of the COVID stuff. So you've lived in New York for a while, and you've had a phenomenal career. I've been off social media, but then I, every once in a while, check back in, and—you did a session with Prince?

CLARK 00:19:19: Yeah.

ALEK 00:19:21: (*laughs*) I'm always finding stuff that you'd played on or people you've played with. It's pretty incredible. Can you shed some light? How did you get some footing in New York, and how did some of those connections develop as soon as you moved there?

CLARK 00:19:41: I could give you a short version or a long version, either one is interesting, but I— Basically, before I got to New York, I was in the Bay Area and I worked there and I met a few people in the Bay Area that knew some people in New York. So I made sure that I spoke with them before I left, and if they had any phone numbers that they could turn me on to. So, I actually talked to a guy named Charles—a drummer named Charles Moffett. I knew his son, Mondre and Charnett Moffett. I knew their son, his son. And they gave me his number and he was great because he knew he knew everybody. Roy Haynes, he knew Max Roach. He knew— Most importantly, he knew Benny Powell and Charlie Persip, who's another great drummer. So he gave me those phone numbers, and I took those numbers with me to New York. I had under \$1,000 with me, which is probably seven or \$800 that I had saved. Which is— In hindsight, I realize now, that wasn't nearly enough money. (*Alek laughs*) It lasted me exactly five days. And living frugal. I wasn't going out buying a bunch of wild stuff, but New York is a very expensive place. It just didn't last. I got a room with the why for as long as my money would last. And I basically went to every session that I can find. I looked up every session in New York—at the Blue Note [Jazz Club], at The Village Gate, anything that I could find. I just went in, brought my horn, and just sat in any opportunity I got. So I just did that every day. And everybody that I met, I took down their phone number, kept it with me, told them what my situation was. It was obvious what my situation was—I had my trombone and my suitcase with me. Yeah, so that's how I did it. Luckily I met a bunch of people that—they were very nice. Some guys really liked what I was playing and they— it was literally just one referral led to another and that's really how it started. Some guy heard you playing this, he'd say, "Oh, well, shoot. I got a gig for you."

One guy, [Wink Flight ?] was—he asked me for my phone number. I said, "Man, I don't have a number, man. I just got here." He said, "Well, how am I supposed to call you for a gig if you don't have a phone number?"

I said, “Bro, I don't even have a place to live.” So he got me a room at this rehearsal building in Jamaica, Queens so I set up shop there. Got a job at Radio City to usher and I just did that for about—it was around Christmas time, so I was able to do—work a show for a couple months, doing the Christmas show, and at nighttime going out and playing sessions. I just did that every day. I made some headway, I picked up some gigs, picked up some shows. I got a regular job in Brooklyn, every Monday, and I met a bunch of great guys there. And then, out of nowhere, I got a call from Charles Tolliver, trumpet player, and this is a couple months into my—this is around June of 88. And he asked me if I had a passport. I said, “No, I don't have a passport.” He says, “Well I'm leaving for Berlin tomorrow. I want to know if you want to go.” And I said, “I'd love to go.” He said, “Well, you got to get your passport, and if you get your passport, you got the gig.”

So I hustled my ass off and got the passport, and everything else I needed to get together—I had a bunch of stuff to get together. I pulled it together and I got on a plane, went to Berlin, and I stayed there for three—I lived there for three months doing a show up there and doing jazz gigs out there. So I met a lot of people out there, and— Basically, what I'm saying is it was really arduous, very long process. But after the Berlin thing, I came back home, didn't have a lot of work, but I did get called to play with Lionel Hampton. I did that for about a year. That was a good gig for the time and just keep on building from there, man. I tried to stay in the jam sessions as much as possible, as much as I could, and just try to stay visible, as much as possible. That's really—there was no—there wasn't one guy that got me in the door or anything, I just—I really hustled and got that together and just stayed visible. And every time that I left the house and did a jam session, something good happened. That's the one thing that I did notice. If I was proactive, something positive would happen, and that became my mantra.

ALEK 00:25:39: Yeah, for sure. That's very cool. I think the other thing that's cool about your career is that you've worked with everybody. You've had so many—in various styles, different kinds of music, and in different profiles. It's so funny, I remember, as a kid, growing up—I remember we were watching, this is early—this was right after 9-11. We're watching that Sting—the concert you did with Sting. And my parents were like, “Oh, that's your cousin playing up there.”

I was like, “Are you serious?” (*Clark laughs*) And it just kept happening. It'd be like an award show and you're up there playing. It was like, how the hell is—this guy's getting around everywhere? (*laughs*)

CLARK 00:26:22: I mean—I got the Sting gig. Well, that was about '96, and I was doing some really horrible gig, playing at a Russian mafia nightclub. I was playing there three nights a week. Horrible gig, long hours. It literally paid \$75 a night. So I was doing that every weekend for about a year. One of the guys in the band played saxophone, and he was good friends with Kenny Kirkland. Sting was starting up a tour. He had a horn section that he was not happy with. So he wanted to get New York guys. So he called my friend Butch. And Butch gave them my phone number, and they called me. I just so happened—I was in the middle of recording one of my records. I was really into it. Then, when I got the call, I actually turned it down three times. I said, “I'm in the middle of my record, I'm really

concentrating on this. This is I want to do right now.” At the time, I was doing a lot of stuff in New York. I was playing with Queen Latifah a little bit, playing with Steel Pulse. I was doing a lot of cool stuff. So I was really happy with my trajectory. So, playing with Sting was not really on my radar. But they said, Well, you know, just come down and meet him, just to say hi. And I said, Okay, I'll come out. So I ran out to my session. I packed up my horn, got it—actually, an artist named Shinehead, the Jamaican rapper—he was at my session and he drove me to Sting's rehearsal. I met everybody and put me up on stage and played a few of his tunes. Sting dug it, and asked me to come back the next day, and that's how that happened. It was once again word of mouth. So I did that for a year, and I ended up leaving that tour after a year to do some other stuff. And Sting called me back for another record he was doing— It was actually for the 9-11 show. And that's the next time that I heard from him, did the show and that gig led into a tour of the new record. So, I got back on. So that was my second tou with Sting.

ALEK 00:29:19: Oh, that's so cool. I mean, it's just, it was really— I'm sure it got to a point to where you're meeting a lot of these— I'm sure, at first, it was kind of surreal to be around some of these people, but then I'm sure it just became one of those things are like you're, it's your job. I'm sure they have various personalities, and you kind of just have to shell that.

CLARK 00:29:45: Well, it's difficult to navigate that, and I think it's one thing that musicians—they don't really consider that when they're getting these jobs. Like, if you do get a job with somebody who has notoriety or is famous, how do you navigate that? How do you behave? And, when I first got to New York, and the type of shows I did—I kind of glazed over a lot, but I played— I did play with a lot of people before I got to Sting. I think right before I played with Sting, I was playing with the Count Basie band, and I played with the Ellington band, and I'd already done a couple Broadway shows, and the Mingus big band I was doing also. The thing that I noticed about— I was always around musicians that were older than me, and I checked out their demeanor when they were in situations. Because I think with the Basie band—I think Joe Williams came by, we'd play with him and also with the—playing with Queen Latifah—the main thing is just to really concentrate on what you're doing, and make sure that you give them what they want. That's your main focus. It's not to be starstruck, that's not your job. Your job isn't to stroke their ego. It's none of that. Your job is to look like you're supposed to be there.
(laughs)

And that was—that's what I concentrated—didn't want them to look like I'm just so happy to be there that they can treat you any sort of way i.e. don't pay you, or pay you a little bit of money. You have to stay professional so that they don't take advantage of you. So you want to make sure that you present yourself professional. You don't want to be arrogant, you don't want to be a prick, but you have to be confident. You have to give the impression that you will—they're gonna want you here. They want you. And then what I tried to do. I try not to be starstruck. I didn't ask them any questions. I got them to ask me questions. That also might be— I figure you just stay quiet and you do your job, eventually they are going to ask you about you. You don't have to force yourself on them and tell everything—all the stuff that you can do, and what you're willing to do— You don't need to do all that, which is a mistake that a

lot of musicians make. They— You just want to make sure that you're respectable and, like I said, I had the advantage of being around a lot of older musicians at a very young age and I just tried to follow their lead in terms of how they carried themselves, very dignified and professional. That goes a long way, too, which is another subject—is professionalism and that when you work with somebody, that one of the most important things is if they know that they can rely on you and that you're a reliable person and nobody's waiting for you and that you take care of the music. So there's a lot of things to be aware of, and that spreads just as fast as The guy plays really well. A lot of times, they just want somebody who's gonna show up. *(laughs)* Are they gonna be there when it's time to be there? A lot of times that is probably one of the most important qualities to have if you're trying to get established is just to be there, be responsible, and shut up. *(laughs)* Nobody wants to hear your story. Nobody wants to hear how great you are, what you did, or what you did in the past. Nobody wants to know that. They want to know what you're doing now and how you're how you're handling the job in hand right now, so that's very important.

ALEK 00:34:02: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Do you see any— Being out in Washington is, in perspective, it feels very far from New York. I was curious: what's the scene? How has it evolved? There's so much talent now coming out. There's a lot of music schools in New York. There's a lot of young talent. There's YouTube. With the scene now in New York, how has it changed, in your eyes, from the time that you were establishing yourself back in the late 80s, early 90s to now?

CLARK 00:34:40: It's completely different from when I first got to New York in the 80s. It just doesn't even resemble it. First of all, like a lot of the older musicians— New York still had a lot of great musicians hanging out. The first Broadway show I did in the 80s, I think was in 89—they did a show called Black and Blue. Ruth Brown was performing with it. Jimmy Slyde. And Grady Tate was on drums. I'm not sure if you're hip to Grady. Grady Tate was playing drums. Al McKibbin was on the bass. Roland Hanna on piano. Those are the kind of guys I was hanging out with regularly. And I was subbing for Britt Woodman, who was a great Ellington trombone player, and also I was good friends with. When I first got to New York, Charles Moffett gave me Benny Powell's number, so I called him as soon as I got off the plane, so I was already friendly with him. I really followed those guys around and those guys really showed me the ropes coming in and that was very, very helpful, being around them and seeing how they conducted themselves. That was a really—a huge help for me. But, unfortunately, now that's not—you don't have that now. The older musicians—it's just so expensive in New York, everybody, most of the cats that—most everybody's moved away, they've taken on college teaching jobs and stuff like that. So, there's really no real community of older musicians to guide—to help younger players. And also what was going on when I first got to New York is—my ability to just hustle gigs. It was really a lot—there's a lot of clubs to play at. And if I had my trombone and I was just walking around downtown Manhattan, I would get a gig just by walking down the street. *(Alek laughs)* They'd say, "You play trombone? You want a gig?" It'd be like that. Or I can go to a salsa club and hang out at the stage door and I would get a gig like that. There was just all these different ways of hustling work and that is impossible now. You can't really do that anymore just because of different political things

that have happened over the years, different mayors that we have— Basically, with the stuff that we're dealing with right now— They closed down a lot of clubs just trying to crack down on minorities and stuff. So a lot— The best way they could control minorities was to close down and shut down the music venues that people were frequent, so that's what happened to that. *(laughs)*

ALEK 00:37:58: Yeah, and it's tough because I got out of school and I was working between the Seattle-Tacoma metropolitan area and Olympia and Portland, doing various projects, and teaching, trying to keep things full. And it was still very challenging, in this scene, which is not as rich as New York, or the East Coast, or a lot of the bigger cities are, but then I went back to school and— It's just interesting because it's like you have to really have a plan. I feel like— I mean, you had a plan, but I feel like now there's no room for error. The cost of living is so high, the gigs are more—

CLARK 00:38:48: Yeah, that's true. There is very little room for error. *(laughs)* That's for sure.

ALEK 00:38:51: The work is, I can imagine, just shrunk exponentially. And so it's like, you have to be very— you just have to have a kind of an idea of what it is you want to do. Like, you were fortunate to be in the situation where you can build a career during the time when the industry was still very rich.

CLARK 00:39:17: Well, yes and no. Yes and no. If I was, —well, I'm talking to a young person right now, but I think that what I would tell someone like yourself at this point is to create your own situations and don't wait for something to be presented to you. If there's a place that you want to play— I would say find the places that you want to play and create a gig. Just go in there and say, “Listen, I noticed you—I love your place here. Have you ever considered having music here?” and I and I even did that when I was younger. I did that stuff, too, when I first got to New York. I would find venues that I wanted to play and I would offer to bring a band in. And if it didn't work, we would just part ways, but if it did work, then we would negotiate the terms. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it didn't. But I think by being proactive—that's how I started my record label. I started recording, I started my own label, I didn't wait for anything. I didn't wait for anything. If I wanted to record, if I wanted a record deal, I made my own record deal for myself. Yeah, I created my own label. I signed myself to my own label. *(laughs)* I started my own publishing company, I did all that so I would highly recommend that to people coming up now because there is basically a clean slate. There is nothing. There's no industry. Literally, there's no industry right now. So you have to create the world that you want to be in. If you want to be gigging somewhere, you'd find someplace where you can create a gig and then make that happen and build on that. And that's been the one constant in my thing in New York is just to constantly find a gig. As you know by now, the more you play, the better—the more stage time, and the more you play, the better you get. So that was my idea: just keep playing, stay on stage, and work it out. And every time you're playing, an opportunity comes up. Every time. I noticed that. Maybe it's just my life, but every time that I set up an opportunity, there was always somebody there that said, Wow, you guys really sound good. I know a guy. Oh, have you ever thought about playing here? I have—doing this, I sing, I play You know, it's always something positive happens from that. If I was just starting right now, that's what I would do.

ALEK 00:42:09: Yeah, for sure. Well, and it's tough because I've been here and it's kind of just circling, playing different projects and what you said—taking every opportunity, and a lot of my education is just built in a lot of—I just realized a long time ago you have to be able to do as much as possible and be well-versed in different areas as you can and, like, right, start your own business, groups, take things in your own hands. I think part of me is still—I haven't had the chance to go to a bigger market and try to do it and try to get on that second—that next tier because out here it's still in very—smaller communities. But I guess you have to just kind of take that jump

CLARK 00:43:03: Even being in Seattle right now— Once again, what I would do, is—one of the most valuable things that I did is—first starting out in New York and in the Bay Area—was getting involved with as much music as possible, no matter what it was. I did the African thing. I did the Latin thing. I did the free jazz thing. I did the straight ahead thing. Whatever it was, I would dive in and I'd try to get it right. And especially with the African stuff and the world beat stuff, I really tried to get inside that and that ended up being the most rewarding because it was just—the rhythms are so complicated, or complex, not complicated, but complex, and it translated into so many different things. That gave me an advantage in almost everything. It gave me a world of advantage. Then, when I got into— reggae was a big part of my career and I dove into that really deep, tried to really find every nook and cranny that I could about reggae. And the same with African—the jùjú and the highlife, all that sort of thing. I tried to really dive in and try to really get to the essence of all that music and that opens up a lot of doors because you become somebody—it gives you value. Like, Wow, this guy's this guy knows all about this Fela stuff. Who's that guy, Tony Lewis? Tony [Allen]—that drummer with Fela. If you start becoming a specialist in that sort of thing—And even in New York, a valuable asset for drummers was to know the New Orleans styles. I think that still is pretty valuable. But I think it's like finding a void and filling it. I think in Seattle, there's probably enough going on in Seattle that people can probably do that if they want to do it, but, even in New York, a lot of musicians—they've been studying Art Blakey and studying Freddie Hubbard and that's all they want to do. The idea of playing compa music with a Haitian band is just like, I don't want to do that. But I always worked. I was always working, always had the horn on my face. So while some guys are waiting around for Art Blakey to call, I was still getting stronger. That's when I was in the Bay Area, before I went to New York—that's really what I did in the Bay Area. I really tried to cover as many bases as I could before I got to New York. It just got to the point where everybody in the Bay Area is like, “You, you gotta go to New York now; you can't get stuck here.”

So, before somebody actually goes to the next level—goes to the next tier, I would say try to get as many nutrients out of the place you are before you do that.

ALEK 00:46:34: Right. And, honestly, that's, when I look back on it, that was really—that's pretty much what I set out to do and that's what I've been pretty much doing [? all this year ?]. And I realized—because I was studying so much jazz in college, and I'm sure a lot of people that studied music— When I started to actually gig and play professionally, most of those jazz gigs were— Man, if

they were there, they were very small and they were background music, they weren't really— A lot of stuff that was paying money was playing pocket in Top 40 stuff, or I was playing in an indie rock band for a while and I realized like, Oh, the jazz stuff's cool and all that's cool, but it's not actually—there's a time and place for a lot of that, but most of it was all just playing pocket. I had a weekly gig in Olympia, and it was playing this funk fusion stuff, and it was all just playing pocket. I was like, Oh, this is what I really need to kind of hone in on more.

CLARK 00:47:31: You start finding that out, you start finding that—think, Well, I can make a lot of money just doing this. I never stopped playing jazz. My love of jazz never really went waned, but I took a very practical, realistic kind of look at it, say, Well, if I play this, I could probably tour. There's a lot of recording opportunities for this. People need this, like you're saying with the pocket stuff. Anybody with a pocket is going to work. You probably know that by now. You got a pocket, you always have a gig. And that pocket works in so many ways. I think the trick is to try to make that pocket work in different genres, like when I was playing jazz, exclusively, everybody says, Wow, you really swing. You really kind of swing, your swing field is really nice. So I tried to translate that swing feel from jazz into compa or reggae. I just made sure that every time I played any music, everybody says, Wow, he really swings. So that was kind of the common denominator throughout all of that, and I still try to do that the best I can.

ALEK 00:48:52: Absolutely, yeah, and I think that's what's always interesting is just never letting go that, as a musician, especially now, you have to be so well-versed in everything and have bits of knowledge in everything. It's kind of funny that they can, in jazz education—all these peers of mine, there was all this emphasis on playing—you know, Charlie Parker heads, which is really great. But there's never any conversation about—I'm sure for yourself, as a horn player, it's like, you played a big band, but you— Because you went to Berklee, right? Was there an emphasis put on popular music, or was it just pretty jazz—the curriculum was like pretty jazz heavy?

CLARK 00:49:40: No, I went there—it was a very interesting time. Jeff Watts was there, a good friend of mine. Yeah, he's a good friend of mine, and he was there. Lots of great drummers. Terri Lyne Carrington was there. A lot of great drummers, a lot of great jazz players. But Berklee had a very great—the jazz program was without [? peer ?]. But they had the jazz rock ensemble, they had the studio orchestra ensemble. So, everything was there. You could play Latin music, you could play all these—plus, the recitals that you played with, the student recitals. So I got involved with all the recitals. I took advantage of all the writing classes there—orchestras, big band, small band. I took a pop writing class. I took a songwriting class, pop songwriting, pop arranging. So I just wanted to make sure I was just very well prepared before I left there, and after I graduated—I actually graduated top of my class, but after I graduated, I had no idea how to get a job. (*laughs*) I didn't know where to start. I had no idea what to do. Do I get a resume? a headshot? What do you do? And then I just realized that my biggest—probably my biggest flaw at the time was just not being willing to just take chances and just start playing anywhere. So I literally—my first gig outside of Berklee was basically playing on the

street. I took my horn to San Francisco, opened up the horn case, and just started playing. And that just kind of gave me—I won't say confidence, but it was just the first step, just kinda like, This is what it is. I'm gonna have to go out and make this thing happen. So, it kind of gave me a little bit more incentive just to go out and talk to people. Can I bring my band in here? Are you interested in music? Talking to people, getting information from people, asking questions. And I'm still learning about how to create situations. I'm still doing it. I'm still figuring that out. But it is very, very hard. In this day and age, it does present a lot more problems, but I think once we kind of get past this virus thing, I think it'll be a little bit more normalcy going on and you'll be able to implement those things.

ALEK 00:52:51

Oh, yeah, absolutely. I mean, I was just I was having a discussion with an old educator of mine earlier today and it's one of those things where as a musician, or artists, it's tough because you're juggling this situation where—having [to] make sure that your life is cool and you're paying, everything's—you have income and you can support yourself still, but there's also—you're not gigging so it's unprecedented to have a time where it's like, Well, I have a lot of time to really dig into this just to keep moving forward. 'Cause that's how it is—you get busy, you go on tour, you play, you're playing every night and you're not really spending the time at home to set up a studio or to get some vocabulary, or whatever the situation is. So it's trying to balance these two right now is the key just to stay, you know, sane.

CLARK 00:53:46: Do you play other instruments or do you compose or anything like that?

ALEK 00:53:50: Well, to be honest, that's been a lot of why I went back to school. When I was in my undergrad, I was essentially studying a dual degree. I was studying a lot of jazz, mainly—predominantly Big Band. So, I got my reading. That school was really good about emphasis on reading. And so it was doing a lot of small group stuff, a lot of big bands, studying a lot of records, developing vocabulary, but also a lot of classical percussion, too, at the time. But the program didn't have a jazz degree per se, and so I decided that I needed to have better intake and have—develop my ability to compose, develop my ability to play piano. And so the last year has just been practicing a lot of piano, working on writing music, understanding composition. Because, like what you said, I really want to lead my ensemble. I want to write music. That's really what I've been wanting to do, but lacked some of the development process. So now it's a matter of—have another thing. So I could play—I take a gig playing piano, playing keys in a band and feel comfortable doing that. I started on piano when I was a kid. So now it's refining those skill sets to get around. I don't have to be, like, Bill Evans or anything, but just having a facility to have a court sheet and read it and play in a group, just to have another option available. I love playing drums, but I also love—I mean, it's like you grew up listening to Stevie Wonder and Prince and they all played everything and you're just like, (*laughs*) Why not?

CLARK 00:55:32: Your father's Peter, right?

ALEK 00:55:32: Yeah.

ALEK 00:55:37: Right, right. I loved your father, and I just talked to Tommy about a week ago. But I used to go visit your grandfather quite regularly and your grandmother Emma.

CLARK 00:55:52: Now were they still alive when you— Were you actually able to hang out with those two?

ALEK 00:55:57: Man, I— No. Emma— She tried to hang on as long as possible. She passed, I think, maybe a week or two before I was born so I missed her a little bit. But from what my mom—because my mom had a great relationship with Emma, and just everybody did and so just getting from the other family talking about her is— We have actually an old cassette tape—videotape of her in the late 80s, I think, that was taken. So I kind of held on to that just to have an idea, but no— They both sound just like wonderful people.

CLARK 00:56:35: Oh, man, they were so funny. (*laughs*) Just like a comedy team.

ALEK 00:56:39: Yeah, no, definitely. Definitely. That was always the vibe. That was always what I got from what my parents—and my parents kind of really embraced that because it seemed like Emma and Leonard were just very welcoming warm people.

ALEK 00:56:56: Does your father still have those records?

ALEK 00:57:01: Yeah, man. I have actually been— Well, some of them he lost years ago. He had a bunch of forty-fives and a couple of smaller albums. Some of them he lost. They either—they got broken or something but he has— I mean, his own personal collection, which is pretty—he has a lot of great stuff in there.

CLARK 00:57:25: But your grandfather had an insane music collection

ALEK 00:57:28: Yeah, I don't know if that made it, unfortunately.

CLARK 00:57:35: Yeah, right right. That was incredible. Leonard had— I used to go over there and spend hours because he had records behind sofas, under the sofa, (*Alek laughs*) under chairs, in the kitchen, under the sink. He had records everywhere and we would— When I would go up there, we would just kind of flip through all the records and see what we could find and he had crazy records. Earl “Fatha” Hines, Art Tatum, Nat Cole. Really great stuff. Really amazing stuff. He gave me an Art Tatum record I still have.

ALEK 00:58:20: Oh, that's awesome. Yeah, we have one of his drums.

CLARK 00:58:26: Oh, really? What's that like?

ALEK 00:58:27: I mean—it's old. It's at my parent's house. There's funny—there's actually a picture of me when I was a baby and I was actually propping myself up upon it. We found it—I was just kind of like, Wow, that was really foreshadowing. It's just one drum. It's an old 1930s, maybe 20s era— It looks like an old Tom. Yeah, it has a thud, kind of thuddiness to it. And then we have Emma's piano.

CLARK 00:59:04: I remember that. I remember the piano.

ALEK 00:59:06: Yeah, I learned—I started learning on that. It actually got damaged in an ice storm here back in the mid 90s and my parents ended up refinishing it and it's beautiful now. It's a gorgeous piano. It's not moving out because the thing's heavy shit, but (*laughs*)

CLARK 00:59:24: She used to have me play— Emma had the sheet music to—what's it called? It's that song everybody plays

ALEK 00:59:38: It's not body and soul is it?

CLARK 00:59:55: (*plays Heart and Soul on piano*) I forget the name of that. Anyway, she had that music sitting on the piano and, every time I went over there, she made me play that. (*laughs*)

ALEK 01:00:03: That's cool, man. I didn't know that. I knew they were always—

CLARK 01:05: Heart and Soul! Heart and Soul is the name of that.

ALEK 01:00:09: Okay. Yeah, yeah. It's interesting getting a little bit more of this perspective because I know the family had music and musicians around it. But now I'm getting more heavy involvement. Because my dad—I remember when I was coming up, he would—he played the trombone very, very briefly, but he was kind—his friends were musicians. He got into the industry a little bit, but he didn't like it. But always had this ear and picked up shit that I was—I could never could figure out how he was hearing some stuff. He'd always just pick out some—I mean, he showed me, as a kid, Tony Williams' ride cymbal pattern. I had no idea how he was even processing any of that.

CLARK 01:00:56: Why— Music was always playing every time I went over there. There's jazz playing every time I went over that house.

ALEK 01:01:03: Yeah, that's what it seems like. That's super cool.

CLARK 01:01:08: Yeah, those were great folks. I loved going up there— He also gave me a bicentennial fifty cent piece I still have. (*laughs*) Yeah, those guys were great. I always looked forward to going over there to see them.

ALEK 01:01:21: Yeah, for sure. Do you— Because when you come back here, you probably see Carver?

CLARK 01:01:28: Yeah. Do you see him much?

ALEK 01:01:32: Yeah, I have been seeing him. Actually, his son, Chandler, is actually going to U dub, too. I guess Carver and Carmen— It's funny 'cause Chandler and I actually went to the same school in our undergrad. He went to Eastern, I went to Eastern. Now we're both at U dub. Just kind of funny coincidence. I see the family periodically. They came out to a gig of mine a year or two ago. I played out in Seattle.

CLARK 01:02:02: How close are you guys in age?

ALEK 01:02:06: Chandler? I think we're around the same age. He might be a year or two older than me, but we're pretty close in age. Try to see the family as much as possible. I went and visited Tomas last— He came up here a couple years ago, but I went and visited him in San Diego back in 2014, so it was a while ago.

CLARK 01:02:30: What about Marilyn?

ALEK 01:02:32: Marilyn. I don't think there's been much contact there.

CLARK 01:02:39: Yeah, I lost touch right. I saw her right before— She was living in Oakland for a minute. So I saw her in the Bay Area, right before I left. I went over there and saw her and met up with her son, Woody.

ALEK 01:02:58: Yeah, for sure. No, that's cool, man. I—

[recording interruption]

CLARK 01:03:09: Well, it was— I can't tell you how it happened, but I can tell you what happened.

ALEK 01:03:15: Yeah, that'd be great.

CLARK 01:03:19: I had just gotten off the road with Sting. And it was a long fucking tour and I was really tired and I remember going to sleep. I fell asleep and, in the middle of the night, it was about 2:30 in the morning—the phone rings. It was a—I had a landline, but there was something really odd about the way that it was ringing, and I was like, Wow, that doesn't sound like a normal phone call. Normally I would say, Well, I'm not going to answer it, but it was just ringing in a very odd way, and I didn't know

what it was. I said, Well, I better answer it. I mean, It's 2:30 in the morning, it's very strange. It must be—maybe it's an emergency, I don't know. Maybe somebody's hurt. And then I answered the phone and he said, "Hello. Is this Clark Gayton?" I said, "Yes." He says, "Okay, let me call you back."

Then he hung up. (*laughs*) And I was like, Okay, that's—and, this sounds really crazy—I was like, Yo, that's Prince. You know what I'm saying? I said, That's Prince. I know it is. There was no reason for me to think it was Prince, but I knew it was.

ALEK 01:04:41: Well, he calls—it sounds like everybody that's interacted with him, that's how he reaches out to them.

CLARK 01:04:52: Yeah, it is, and I found out later this is like the common— And then they call back, and they say, "Hello Clark Gayton. Yeah, we called—Sorry about that. The Artist would like to know if you'd like to come to Minneapolis and record on his new LP." (*laughs*)

And I said, "Well, yeah, sure. When you wanna get down?" He says, "Oh, uh, 10am is your flight."

I said, "Dude, it's 2:30." He says, "Yeah, well he needs you now."

So I was like, "Okay. Alright." He said, "Well, the ticket will be— You're flying out of Newark. The ticket will be at the gate."

Yeah, and that's what happened and I don't know how we got my phone number. I have no idea. I got to the—to Newark and ask for the ticket and it wasn't there. And so I call the number, the contact number, and he's like, "Well, can you—maybe you could cover it for him." (*laughs*)

And I was like, Aw, man, come on. This old jive shit. I was like— But I was like, Yo, this is Prince. I got this—I had money. I just got off the road. It was 500 bucks. I got to check this out. So I paid the money. Soon as I got there, they paid me back. And a purple limousine was waiting outside. (*Alek laughs*) And yeah the whole shit. Ten got in the limousine and they gave me—the guy driving gave me the law of the land about how to address him, how to talk to him, what he—was expected, all that sort of thing. And that's what happened. Got back to the hotel and, as soon as I got to the room, the phone rang and The Artist—that's what he was going by at the time—asked and requested my presence in the main studio. So we went there and waited for him for about five hours. Then he finally showed up and then we did about a seven hour rehearsal after that. After the seven hour rehearsal, he wanted to go in the recording studio. So we went to the studio, recorded a couple of singles. And then, after we got done with that, it was about four in the morning. And then he says—the manager came down and says, "Well, The Artist wants you to learn the show because we're going to do a gig." (*Alek laughs*)

It was totally nuts. I was like, Whatever, bro. Then they came in with a videotape. So they want us—they showed us—they put us in a room to view the video and watch the show. And the other two horn players are just like all over, they're trying to learn this all. [? I said, "Bro. ?] It's impossible to learn this, man. I'm not—I'm tired. I ain't learning it. This is crazy. We've been up for almost two days, and now we're supposed to learn a whole two hour show on a VCR?" I didn't do it. I just went to sleep in the corner. I said, "Let me know when you guys are done." And so, they got done. They wrote out everything, and then we call the limo to take us back to the hotel. We went back to the hotel. We got about two hours sleep until the phone rang again. Prince wants us back in the studio. And we went back, did a nine hour rehearsal, did the whole thing basically all over again. The difference was, later that night, he wanted to go to a nightclub and see how we behaved at the nightclub, how we got along hanging out at the party. Then, the next day we did the rehearsals again and got ready for the show that night, and then we did a concert. And we did none of the songs that they asked us to learn. (*Clark and Alek laugh*)

I knew that was gonna happen. I knew that was gonna happen. I think, at one point, Prince asked me if I learned the stuff, and I said, "Nah, I didn't learn that." I said, I was tired. I mean, there was a lot of stuff there and I can't—that's a lot of stuff to remember, man. And he said, "Well, you can't flow?"

I said, "If you want me to roll with you, I can do that. If you just want to just roll and just kind of wing it, we could do that. And it would be cool. Yeah, but I can't— It's impossible for anybody to learn—" I didn't see it as an insult against my musicality to tell him I couldn't do it. I can't do it. I don't know anybody that can do that. I don't know anybody in my entire music experience that can learn a two hour show in an hour and a half. So I just didn't do it. It was cool. We did the show. He didn't do any of the music. After the show was over, he's like, "Yeah, man, I like your style. I want you to join the band."

So I said, "Well, I'll go home and I'll think about it." Then they told me how much you paid. I declined. But that's what happened. How he got my phone number, to this day, I still don't know.

ALEK 01:10:58: Well, I'm sure once you— At that point of no return, you're working with so many people, it probably just—floating around.

CLARK 01:11:09: Well, yeah, or he could just call information. (*laughs*) You know, my phone was listed so it was very easy to find my phone number. But it was a great experience and the track actually—it holds up pretty good.

ALEK 01:11:24: Yeah, no, I took a listen to it. Yeah, it's great. Clark, I really, really appreciate you taking the time for this. I have to go transition for my class.

CLARK 01:11:39: If you need any more stuff, let me know. I'll be around. I'm not going nowhere (*laughs*)

ALEK 01:11:42: I really, really appreciate it. And just having you as a resource is just incredible. And I know this is long overdue to kind of talk.

CLARK 01:11:50: Anytime, man. I'm glad you called. And tell your—tell Peter I said hello, and that I miss him.

ALEK 01:11:56: Will do. Will do, Clark. Thank you so much. Take care.